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## BELIEFS AND PRACTICES RELATING TO BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD AMONG THE GALICIAN UKRAINIANS

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### I. Pregnancy and Birth

Pregnancy, to the Ukrainian peasant, is a phenomenon surrounded by mysterious forces which, if offended in any way, are sure to bring misfortune upon the expectant mother and her unborn child. A pregnant woman is treated with consideration, and is usually showered with wishes for an easy confinement. A person mistreating an expectant mother exposes himself and his household to harm.[1] In the belief that labour pains, especially acute ones, are not inevitable but are caused by evil powers,

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[1] *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, by G. R. Owst, Cambridge, 1933. P. 99. Reinfelden's Moralization is in MS. Egerton 2419.

[1] Kaindl, R. F., *Die Huzulen: Ihr Leben, ihre Sitten, und ihre Volksüberlieferung* (Wien, 1894), p. 4.

843 784 789 the Ukrainian peasant woman keeps her pregnancy as secret as possible. The Devil and persons with supernatural powers will thus be kept in ignorance and, consequently, be prevented from interfering in any way with her accouchement.[2] The expectant mother therefore avoids mentioning her condition to any one except the midwife. A husband, for the same reason, dislikes to speak of his wife's pregnancy.[3] Some women, especially among the mountaineers (*huzuls*), even wind about themselves a broad strip of woollen bandage, in order to hide their condition. So tightly is the bandage wrapped that it has a definite effect upon the child, which is usually very small at birth; in order to assure its normal development the midwife, upon delivering it, exclaims: "Now grow!"[4]

[847] A child is, as a rule, a welcome addition to the family. Hence an enceinte woman, legitimately married, rarely attempts abortion or infanticide.[5] On the contrary, she is greatly concerned to give birth to a healthy child, and in order to assure herself of this, she cautiously watches nearly every step she takes and strictly observes a variety of taboos. The precautions and taboos, both before and after birth, are based in most cases on the belief that things or actions produce similar results. In other words, certain objects that the pregnant woman may see or touch, certain foods that she may eat, and certain phenomena that she may observe, hear, or feel, will register a corresponding effect upon her child. Wherever, therefore, the consequences are obviously undesirable, a pregnant woman tries to avoid doing or observing the thing in question, or, if this is impossible, to guard against them by certain means which are usually imitative in nature. A few examples follow.

[13] [2] Kolberg, O., *Pokucie: Obraz Etnograficzny* (4 vols., Kraków, 1882–1889), i, 208.

[3] *Idem.*

[4] Szuchiewicz, W., *Huculszczyzna* (4 vols., Lwów, 1902–1908), ii, 2.

[5] Unmarried girls, on the other hand, very often take steps to dispose of their unborn children. Cf. Koenig, S., "Marriage and the Family among the Galician Ukrainians," in *Studies in the Science of Society*, G. P. Murdock (Editor) (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 302–303.

843 If a pregnant woman looks fixedly at a person, or for that
784 matter if he stares at her, her child will be pretty or the reverse,
789 depending on that person's appearance. She therefore tries not to look at or be seen by an ugly individual.[6] She also avoids looking at a fisherman, lest her child will have a restless nature.[7] Neither must she watch a horse shaking its head, or her child will be constantly subject to similar behaviour.[8] If, on the other hand, she happens to see a galloping steed, her pregnancy will last twelve months.[9] Upon observing a mouse, an expectant mother must spit and touch her abdomen; otherwise her child will be born with a mark resembling a mouse on its body. A fire in the village may have a similar effect; if a woman is frightened by it and does not spit immediately, her unborn child will have the mark of a flame on its body. Should a pregnant woman eat an apple at the approach of her confinement, warts are likely to appear on the face of her child;[10] and if the apple be a stolen one, the child will grow up to be a thief.[11]

843 Definite signs enable one to predict the sex of an unborn child. If the prospective mother eats her meals with a good appetite, for example, it is a sign that she will have a boy; otherwise her child will be a girl. According to another indication, if the woman is to have a boy large spots appear on her face before her confinement, but if her face remains smooth and white
844 she is sure to have a girl.[12] The destiny of the child, and even
777 of the parents, can be foretold from certain omens. If birth
787 occurs around noon the child is destined to be unfortunate, while a baby born at daybreak will be lucky.[13] The crowing of a cock during birth is a bad omen. The birth of twins presages disaster, *e.g.*, the imminent death of one of the parents or the

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[6] Kolessa, J., "Narodziny i chrzciny, wesele i pogrzeb u ludu ruskiego," *Zbiór Wiadomości do Antropologii Krajowej*, xii (Kraków, 1889) 117; Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 4.

[7] Kaindl, *ibid.*, p. 4.

[8] Kolessa, in *Zbiór Wiad. do Antr. Kraj.*, xiii, 117.

[9] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 4.

[10] Szuchiewicz, *op. cit.*, ii, 1.

[11] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 4.

[12] Kolberg, *Pokucie*, iii, 174.

[13] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 4.

844 obstetrical experience. The first act of the *baba* is to give the mother a generous dose of whisky to ease her pains. Then she makes her walk thrice around the table, opening and loosening all closed, covered, or tied objects, such as benches, shelves, closets, and boxes; this has the effect of easing the birth of the child. This done, the midwife takes consecrated wreaths of herbs and holds them over the fire, to fumigate the confined woman with their smoke. If all this fails to have the desired effect, and the delivery proceeds with difficulty, the *baba* runs to the church and begs the sexton to lend her the girdle worn by the priest at divine service; returning home, she winds this about the woman and the child is then born with the greatest of ease.[20]

A woman usually delivers her baby in either a kneeling or a standing position. At times, when the case is especially difficult, she is led around in the room by two women, who grasp her under the arms. When delivery begins, the mother kneels down upon a cover spread out on the floor and deposits the 844 baby upon it.[21] The midwife takes the child as soon as it is 777 born, and holding it head down, beats thrice with the soles of its feet on the centre beam of the ceiling, so that it will grow up as strong as the beam. She then makes the sign of the cross over it, sprinkles some holy water on its head, and gives it a warm bath. If the baby is a girl, she puts into the bath some honey, mint, and other sweet-smelling herbs, so that it may grow up to be a sweet and pleasant girl.[22] The water of the bath is not poured out until the following morning; otherwise "the sleep of the child will be carried out along with it."[23]

Having dried the child at the fire, bundled it up, and put it on the oven to sleep, the midwife prepares a bed for the mother 844 at the corner of the oven. Under the sheet she puts some hay ● 784 consecrated with holy water, and on the bar over the bed she hangs a large sheet to separate the bed from the rest of the room. 789 Before the mother lies down, however, the *baba* takes care to tie a piece of garlic on her chest and to place near her, on the

[20] Kolberg, *Pokucie*, i, 211.

[21] *Ibid.*, iii, 174; Szuchiewicz, *op. cit.*, ii.

[22] Kolberg, *Pokucie*, iii, 175.

[23] Kolessa, in *Zbiór Wiad. do Antr. Kraj.*, xiii, 117.

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bed, a knife and some keys, because iron has the power to drive away evil forces.[24]

A precaution never forgotten is to light a candle immediately after the delivery; otherwise the baby, not being baptized as yet, would surely be harmed by lurking evil forces. Under no circumstances must the light be extinguished, at least not until holy water is obtained from the priest and sprinkled over the mother, the baby, and the entire room.[25] Besides this essential precaution, a multitude of other means are taken to protect the child and assure its healthy growth. As soon as possible after birth, for example, there is tied to the right wrist of the infant a little sack, called *szkalytoczka*, which contains the following articles: a piece of garlic—to make the child as sharp as this vegetable; a piece of clay from the oven—to make it as immune to the evil eye as is the oven; a piece of coal—to make the eyes of whoever casts upon it an evil glance burn like coal; some dust from the tracks of a dog—so that people will stare at it no more than they do at a dog's tracks. A small wooden cross is likewise hung on the infant's neck.[26] A mother must not turn her back upon her baby lest it turn yellow,[27] or be taken by a superhuman woman, the *diwa-baba*,[28] in exchange for a brat of hers. Nothing in the house may be given away on the day of birth, or the child will be given to sleeplessness. Whoever takes a glance at a newborn infant must spit immediately—to make sure that the child has not been bewitched.[29] Throughout the first night, some member of the family must keep watch, so that nothing may befall the child.[30]

A person's destiny, it is believed, is determined immediately upon his birth, at which moment twelve invisible judges convene on the window-sill near the table. Eleven of them pronounce

[24] *Idem.*

[25] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 5. [26] Szuchiewicz, *op. cit.*, ii, 4.

[27] Kolessa, in *Zbiór Wiad. do Antr. Kraj.*, xiii, 118.

[28] Regarding the nature of this mysterious woman, see Koenig, S., "Supernatural Beliefs among the Galician Ukrainians," *Folk-Lore*, xlix (Sept. 1938), 274.

[29] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, pp. 4–5.

[30] Kolessa, in *Zbiór Wiad. do Antr. Kraj.*, xiii, 118.

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while the father, who takes
851 a passive part throughout the ceremony,[35] busies himself with
608 supplying the assembled guests with drinks, the *baba* repairs to
553 the village to invite the godparents (*kumy*) to the christening. The number of men and women asked to act in this capacity ranges from a single couple to as many as fifteen, depending upon the wealth and social status of the parents. The most desirable godparents are the couple who acted as best man and
851 maid of honour at the wedding of the parents.[36] A pregnant
608 woman, too, is considered a most acceptable godmother, for a
784 child held during baptism by such a woman is assured of good
777 luck. An enceinte woman, however, seldom consents to play the rôle, since her own child may be harmed thereby.[37] The wealthier and more prominent the godparents, the more desirable they are. If the parents have been unfortunate in rearing children, however, they invite a couple of wandering beggars to act as godparents and treat them with the greatest of courtesy. This, it is asserted, will change the luck of the parents, and will make the child grow and be healthy.[38] For two women to reciprocate as godmothers is considered not only unwise but a downright sin.[39] Near neighbours, too, make anything but good godparents. Since the two families live in close contact, it is almost inevitable that a quarrel shall sometime arise between them, and tradition as well as propriety strongly disapproves of unfriendly relations with one's *kumy*.[40] Contrary to what one might expect, for a gypsy to hold a child at baptism is supposed to bring it good luck, especially in trade and horse-raising.[41]

851 The midwife approaches the people selected as godparents
608 with these words: "May God grant you health! The mother
553 of the baby has sent me to ask you to do her the favour of holding her child during baptism." If they agree to undertake the function, they either follow her to the house a little later or else promise to meet her in the church at a designated hour.

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[35] According to D. Zelenin, *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927), p. 295, the passivity may be explained by the fact that he is, like his wife, considered unclean.

[36] Kolberg, *Pokucie*, i, 208–211.

[37] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 0.

[38] Kolberg, *Pokucie*, i, 210.

[39] *Idem.*

[40] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 6.

[41] *Idem.*

853 regarding food. For this reason she often makes it drink a spoonful of dishwater immediately after birth or weaning.[68]

857 Children mean additional working hands, and hence an increased source of income to the peasant's household. The older the boy or girl gets, the more indispensable does he become in the house, helping his father or mother. When scarcely eight years of age, he runs all sorts of errands, carries his father's lunch out to the distant fields all by himself, rides the horses to water, drives the cattle out to pasture—in a word, learns to depend upon himself. At the age of twelve he already performs practically all the tasks of an adult, sometimes working even harder than his parents.

869 From its very infancy the child is inculcated with various
● 784 folk beliefs. It is taught; for example, not to spit on the fire, lest it get the mark of a flame on its face; not to eat apples before St. Spas (18th August, O.S.), lest frogs multiply in its belly; never, in the case of a girl, to walk backwards, lest she remain long unmarried; and not to throw away the nails that it bites off its fingers but to hide them in its bosom, for they belong to the Devil, who will demand them after death.[69]

872 The life of a boy is marked by no special ceremonies until the time of courtship. In the case of a girl, the only formal ceremony occurs in her sixth year, when her hair is put up for the first time. Before that age, her tresses fall freely about her shoulders. For the ceremony the mother invites a woman, called *sochtiwna*, who is experienced in such matters. Gathering the girl's hair from her forehead and from the back and both sides of her head, the woman ties the four strands together in the centre, saying: "As I am tying your hair from all four sides that it may adhere together, so may boys, widowers, sons of wealthy parents, and the most distinguished youths of the land seek you from all directions; whoever shall see you shall swoon for you, as a fish does for water." The parents thenceforth usually pay a little more attention to their daughter's appearance; at least they try to see to it that she wears another garment in addition to her shirt.

[68] Kaindl, *Die Huzulen*, p. 7. [69] Szuchiewicz, *op. cit.*, ii, 10.

[70] *Ibid.*, ii, 10–11.